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ABSTRACT

A range of language use model is proposed as an alternative conceptual framework to a stage model of egocentric speech. The range of language use model is proposed to clarify the meaning of the term egocentric speech, to examine the validity of stage assumptions, and to explain the existence of contextual variation in the form of children's speech. The basic premise of this approach is that four forms of speech--private, social, egocentric, and socialized--coexist developmentally. Illustrative examples of each form of speech are given from tape recordings of natural conversations of the author and her daughters over a 5-year period (J. aged 4 to 9, and L. aged 1 to 6). The fundamental developmental assumption of a range of language use approach is that competence is a function of the interplay between a speaker who possesses certain intrinsic abilities and a context of language use that exerts specific demands on these abilities. It is assumed that there are developmental differences between adults and children in the range of contexts in which each can use language effectively. The distinctions between egocentric and private speech, and between social and socialized speech, provide a conceptual basis for resolving the interpretative controversy that resulted from the fusion in Piaget's 1926 theory of egocentric speech of the social-motivational and cognitive sources of breakdown in children's interpersonal communication. (Author/SS)

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Egocentric Speech Reconsidered

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The purpose of my research is to propose a range of language use model that can serve as an alternative conceptual framework to a stage model of egocentric speech. In essence, a range of language use model provides a theoretical alternative for clarifying the meaning of the term egocentric speech, for examining the valididty of stage assumptions and for explaining the existence of contextual variation in the form of children's speech.

My examples come from a 70-hour, cross-contextual and longitudinal corpus of tape recordings of my own daughters, for J., aged 4;1.14 to 9;1.14 and for L., aged 1;4.14 to 6;4.14. These examples are intended to be illustrative rather than generalizable.

The basic premise of a language range approach is that four forms of speech, private, social, egocentric, and socialized coexist developmentally. Each form of speech is conceived of as a prototypical pattern of language use that defines a benchmark along a continuum rather than as the characteristic communicative behavior of a stage in a linear developmental sequence. The forms of speech are differentiated from one another on the basis of their communicative function and outcome. The hypothesis that these forms of speech relate to one another as developmentally contemporaneous and context-sensitive alternatives along a continuum was derived from the sociolinguistic notion of communicative competence (Hymes 1974).

Figure 1 illustrates hypothetically how the range might differ with respect to the overall potential contexts of language use at three different developmental levels. While it is obvious that the defining features of each prototypical pattern, the relative incidence and the uses of the forms of speech will change with development, the potential for engaging in each form of speech remains constant given some specific set of eliciting conditions.

Insert Table 1 about here

The fundamental developmental assumption of a range of language use approach is that competence is a function of the interplay between a speaker who possesses certain intrinsic abilities and a context of language use that exerts specific demands on these abilities. From this perspective, any speaker, irrespective of his or her developmental level, is competent in some communicative contexts and incompetent in others. Thus, it is assumed that there are developmental differences between adults and children in the range of contexts in which each can use language effectively. Development involves the accretion of the cognitive, social and linguistic skills that increase the range of contexts in which a child can use language in a competent manner.

At any given point in development, a child is not in a stage of egocentric speech, despite the fact that cognitive egocentrism is more likely to affect the outcome of interpersonal communication in a proportionally greater range of contexts than a more mature speaker. Nor is adult-speech totally free from a form of communicative failure that is based on the inability to decenter.

Theoretically, a range approach provides a conceptual basis for resolving the interpretative controversy that resulted from the fusion in Piaget's 1926 theory of egocentric speech of the social-motivational and cognitive sources of breakdown in children's interpersonal communication. As a consequence of this theoretical fusion, the term egocentric speech is used in the subsequent literature to refer to two unrleated types of communication. In some studies, egocentric speech is used as if it were synonymous with

"private speech" to refer to an intrapersonal form of language use. In others, the same term is used to describe interpersonal communication that is characterized by centration. Each of these generalizations represents a theoretically and empirically justifiable resolution of the ambiguities in Piaget's original explanation of egocentric speech. In addition, the distinction in meaning between the terms social and socialized needs to be clarified.

In his mature work, Piaget (1962) provides the necessary theoretical information to resolve these interpretative problems. He distinguishes between the intra- and interpersonal functions of language ase well as between two levels of interpersonal contact, the social and the cognitive. On the basis of this theoretical information, it is possible to derive two additional forms of speech, private and social, from Piaget's original descriptions of children's spontaneous speech.

From a Piagetian perspective, the term egocentric speech refers to interpersonal communication that is characterized by centration or the failure to shift cognitively from one's own viewpoint. I am using egocentric speech in this Piagetian sense in defining a range of language use. Functionally, egocentric speech is interpersonal language that is intended to convey information to a listener. By definition, the communicative outcome of egocentric speech is always failure at the level of the cooperative or adapted exchange of information. Communication breaks down because mental operations-- that is to say the manner in which reality is perceived and cognitively structured-- are not shared.

Problems of decentering enter into communicative situations in two obvious ways. One issue concerns the participatory structure of the interaction. There are actually two types of decentering, symmetrical and

and asymmetrical, that depend upon the developmental and experiential knowledge base that participants share.

In symmetrical decentering, it can be assumed that the participants share a knowledge base that is fairly comparable as in the case of same-aged, well acquainted peers. In asymmetrical decentering, it is assumed that there are developmental and/or experiential differences in the comparability of the knowledge base. In that case, the less knowledgable participants have to shift upward from their own cognitive perspective, while their more knowledgable coparticipants shift downward from their original more "advanced" vantage point. The latter may be a less difficult communicative problem than the former.

Example 1 illustrates an asymmetrical situation in which there is mutual difficulty in decentering. The mother's analogy that a cat eating a bird is comparable to a person eating chicken overestimates what the child can understand. Moreover, the mother fails to use feedback even in the face of obvious evidence that her child is hopelessly confused and unable to decenter upward.

1) A few minutes prior to this breakfast-time conversation, J., 4;5.24, and L., 1;8.24, and M. had discovered the cat eating a bird. (Turns 23-46 of a 48 turn episode involving a mutual failure to decenter.)

M: We're eating the parts of a bird/.4 It it isn't/isn't alive anymore/ 3.2

J: Cause the bird got so: old, (.2) right?/ 1.5

M: No/.8

J: Cause the cat ate it?/.8

M: What/= The chicken we eat or the cat/ or the bird out there that the cat killed/= What are we talking about/ 2 The bird out there?/ 1

L: Unn-nn/ 1.2

J: Peanuts (the cat) doesn't eat chicken/ 1

M: No/1.6

J: And (.2) and so/ 1.8 (slowly) It means (2) he/ there/ that/ there's (.2) the bird and the part of the bird (.3) on the leg (1.5) is the face/.5 There's the face on the leg/.2 On the/on/ on the way, way back: (.1) of the leg/.2

M: What/= (amused voice) Of the chickens (laugh) that we eat?/.6

J: Of, of the bird/.3

M: No the face isn't on the way, way back of the leg/1 The chicken the (.5) the face is off of the neck/.3 Just like that bird/8.6 Does that make any sense tuh you?/.4

J: No/.8

Any episode of speech is a sequentially negotiated event that takes place in real time. Decentration is required at many different junctures in the negotiation of an interpersonal exchange of information. At a minimum, a speaker must decenter in order to: 1) assess the listener's knowledge of the projected ideational content; 2) adapt the ideational content to the assessment of the listener's knowledge; 3) encode the ideational content into language with linguistic devices that are selected from the listener's point of view; and 4) check the communicative outcome and if need be locate and repair a source of breakdown.

In sum, cognitive egocentrism is the hallmark of egocentric speech in a Piagetian sense. Evidence that this type of communicative breakdown is occurring is most noticeable in the ideational content of speech. To prove that interlocutors-- be they children or adults-- are capable of carrying on a sociable, semantically relevant conversation does not discount Piaget's hypothesis that their communication may break down at the level of the

interchange of the thoughts being expressed by the ideational content of their speech.

On the range of language use that I am proposing, the intrapersonal function that Vygotsky described as egocentric speech is renamed private speech (cf. Kohlberg, Yaeger & Hjertholm 1968, Zivin 1979). The defining characteristic of private speech is that the speaker's language is not directed to an outside or real-world listener. Private speech fails to convey information to a real-world listener for reasons related to the speaker's lack of social orientation, be it situationally or motivationally imposed.

Examples 2, 3 and 4 illustrate forms of private speech that are comparable to behaviors that Piaget originally described in his subclassification of egocentric speech as:

2) Repetition-- J., 4;7.0, is eating breakfast with her family.

J: Oh flippity-flappity flip/ .3 (loud) Oh flippity-flappity flap/

3) Monologue-- L., 3;4.12, is pretending to talk on the telephone. M. and J. are present. (Utterances 1-7 of a 15 utterance, audible dialogue)

L: Yeah?/ 3.4 Father?/1.2 The father bear is taking care of children/.4 A lot of childrens/= No mother/.8 Yeah/.3 Well want me tuh help on your merry-go-round fixin?

4) Collective Monologue-- In this quasi-experimental situation, J., 7;4.11, and L., 4;7.11, are working side-by-side on separate art projects. (Utterances 1-10 of a 22 utterance episode)

J: Dimm Dumm/ 5.2 (barely audible singing) I'm gonna git some/3 (rapid mutter)

L: See this has remote control to it/7 (soft) There/2 (mutter) This is a neat T.V./.3 (low normal voice) There's another T.V. on top of the (.1) the bottom T.V./.5 There's a top T.V./.2 There's another

L: T.//V]

J: // Oh look] it!/= I made myself a slipper/.1

Piaget's initial definition of egocentric speech implies that sometimes the child's only real purpose in talking is to maintain an interpersonal orientation to a listener in the absence of any intellectual desire to exchange specific information. Such speech is social, but it is not socialized.

The reason why social speech fails as a vehicle for conveying adapted information to a listener is that its primary function is to establish and/or to maintain sociability. The sharing of thought is incidental to this maintenance of sociableness, although such speech need not be devoid of content. In its most clearly identifiable form, there is an element of chit-chat, and there may be bantering and playfulness as well.

5) Repetition-- The sound of L., 1;10.0, blowing bubbles in her milk elicits a response from J., 4;7.0, that leads to an episode of sound play.

L: L. is blowing bubbles in her milk with a straw.

J: Tt-tt/.2 (whispered, spit-like)

F: Uh//huh]

M: // Pluff-] pluff/.7 Ppp/.3

J: Puh/=

L: =Elongated spitting with tongue against teeth/.3

M: Piffle/.4

J: Piffle/.5

L: Pif-fle/.4

F: // Uh-huh]

M: //But] listen tuh you/.2 Piffle-bottom/.3

J: Piffle -bottom/ (soft voice)

In sum, social speech permits conversationalists to remain in interactional

contact without requiring of them the more strenuous communicative effort of exchanging thoughts to the degree required in socialized speech.

It should now be apparent that egocentric and socialized speech are reciprocal forms that differ from one another in their communicative outcome. The principle function of both egocentric and socialized speech is to convey information to a listener. Episodes of potentially socialized speech that fail for cognitive reasons are egocentric speech. Initially egocentric episodes that are repaired intellectually by the decentration of the participants are socialized speech.

6) This example comes from a 45 minute conversation between J., 6;0.0, and her mother that occurred in response to the death of the family's cat. J. decenters from her initial perspective of magical thinking to the point where she can contemplate her own death.

J: But everybody always dies (.1) I bet/.5

M: Yes/= Everything does have to die, J./3 Someday/1.5

J: Someday even me and you have to die/.2

M: That's right/.2 Someday we even hafta die/ 4

J: You know I could die before you die by getting sick or something/ .2

M: Yes/= But children don't usually die/ .1

In sum, these examples and my data more generally are comparable to and confirm Piaget's original descriptions of young children's communication. However, the theoretical significance of these communicative patterns is reinterpreted in terms of a range of language use model. From this theoretical perspective, it is possible to integrate into a single conceptual framework the many conflicting descriptions of children's communicative competence. It is, in fact, assumed that there will be contextual variation in the general forms of children's speech and the degree to which any specific instance of a

given form is a representative example.

In actual use, this range is not meant to be a taxonomy that classifies every instance of a child's language into one of four discrete categories. Rather, it is intended as a heuristic for recognizing and explaining prototypical patterns of variation in the general form of children's speech. It is assumed that SES and cross-cultural variation in the relationship of language to context would affect such a range and lead to different distributional patterns among the forms of speech. In the light of this conceptualization, the challenge for future research is to search for patterns in the types of contexts that elicit this communicative variation and to discover the developmental precursors to and modifications of each form of speech.

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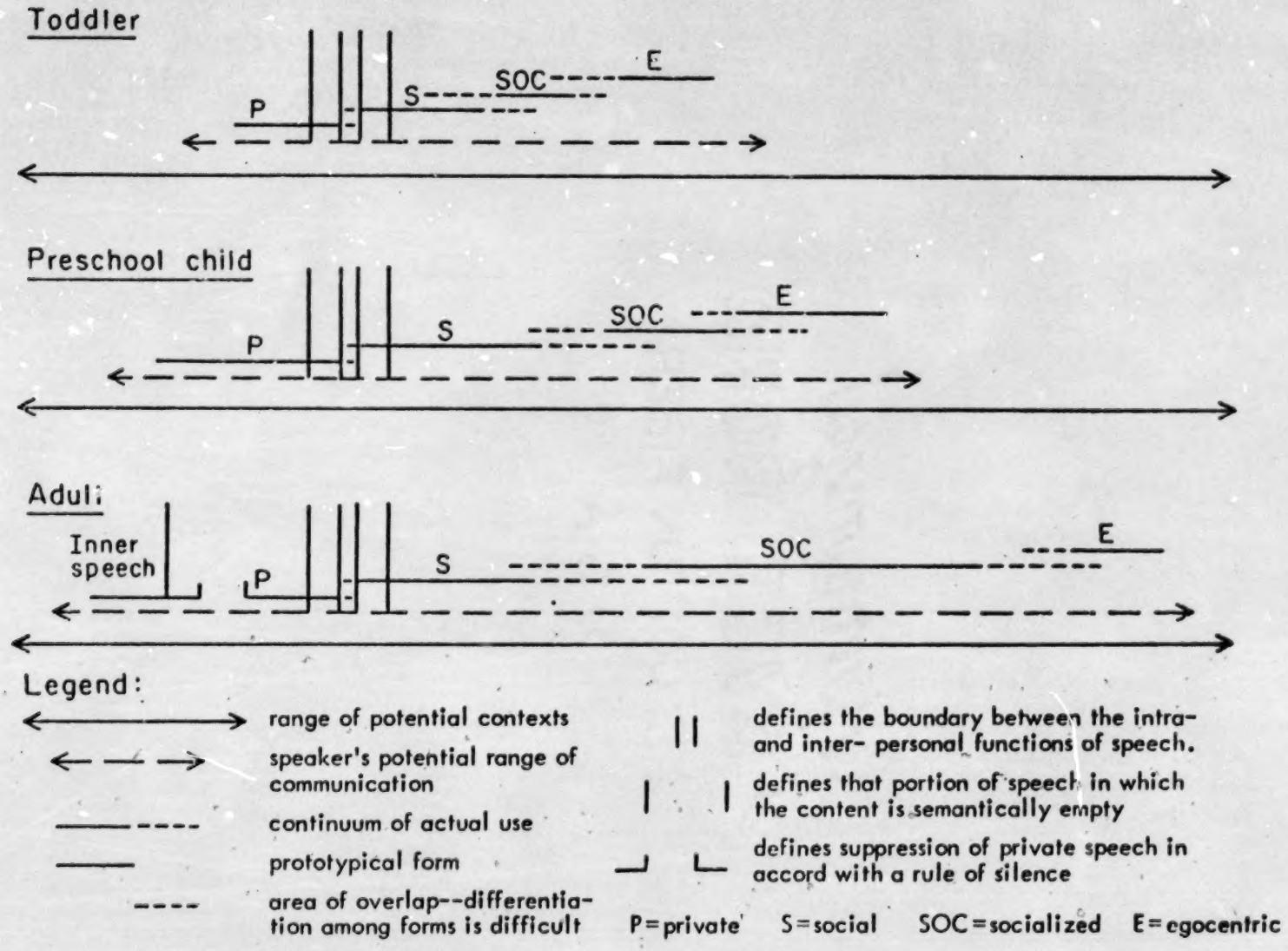

Fig. 1. Hypothetical developmental changes in the forms of speech